

A Previously Unsolvable Problem: From Chickens and Cows to Fungi
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Without the help of Denis Vidmar, a second-generation mushroom expert, all hope might have been lost. Once Denis was introduced to the Barretts and to RAP, he put his expertise to work to overcome a variety of challenges to a profitable mushroom operation.

The chicken-raising industry saddles family farms with insurmountable debt and offers at best, subsistence living, to even the most productive chicken farmers through predatory contracts.

The Barrett Farm had contracts with the largest chicken producers in the US and were top producers throughout their time raising chickens—more than 100,000 birds every six weeks.

Despite being top producers, they earned just enough to provide for the simplest family needs while their debt to the banks continued to increase.

When they stopped raising chickens, the banks came after them and threatened them with foreclosure. And when they stopped sending cows from their herd to the sale barn, they found themselves with nearly 250 (very hungry) mouths they would need to feed for many years to come.





A Big Dream of Something Different

The Barretts sought out the help of the Rancher Advocacy Program to envision a totally new kind of livelihood—one that would allow the Barretts to replace chicken farming with a compassionate, nutritious, environmentally friendly alternative.

Mushrooms to the rescue! RAP and the Barretts worked together with a team of experts to create a business model that would turn the 500 foot-long chicken barns on their property into a mushroom farm operation.

But the Path Was Full of Obstacles

How could they produce enough mushrooms to care for their family and the animals that call the Barrett Farm home?

How could they confront massive debt owed to the banks for the property and equipment they had needed to run a chicken operation?

Even if they could produce a large volume of mushrooms, how could they distribute fresh product to enough customers during a very narrow window of time while the mushrooms were fresh?

And then, a giant obstacle....Pandemic. Supply chain problems for building materials. Restaurants going out of business in unprecedented numbers. Progress ground to a halt.

Generous donors helped keep the Barretts' cows fed and healthy during that difficult period of time, but the obstacles remained. The plan had to be completely re-visioned.





Enter the Fungi Guru

Without the help of Denis Vidmar, a second-generation mushroom expert, all hope might have been lost. Once Denis was introduced to the Barretts and to RAP, he put his expertise to work to overcome a variety of challenges to a profitable mushroom operation. Denis proposed an updated business model that applied new technologies and strategies that would enable the operation to not only produce an enormous volume of exotic mushrooms, but that would also solve the distribution network and timing problem. It seemed that a profitable, sustainable mushroom plan was back on the table.

But What about the Threat of Foreclosure?

In the meantime, the banks were running out of patience and served the Barretts with foreclosure documents, all while they struggled to keep their family and animals healthy and fed. RAP fundraising had helped the Barretts' cows in big ways, but there just weren't enough funds to sustain the herd and satisfy creditors. The only way forward would be to bring together a network of donors and investors who could provide debt payment funds, payment of farm expenses, AND front the capital needed to build out a state of the art mushroom operation. Not exactly a fathomable task....until we fathomed it.





How Did it All Come Together?

One of the big lessons learned in the Barretts' farm transition was that in situations where transitioning farmers have significant debt, many players need to come to the table to create a new path forward. The Barretts welcomed the assistance of RAP, Denis Vidmar, a consortium of donors and investors, and other key individuals to execute a plan of massive proportions. Debts were paid, Cows were fed. Big plans were made.

The Barretts began the daily work of mushroom farm construction while caring for a big herd of cows that needed to be moved to different grazing areas on a regular basis. The Barretts' property, now safe from creditors, could be held in trust and family and farm expenses paid, while the team worked to build the operation and begin producing mushrooms. Denis provided day-to-day oversight of the buildout while building out his North American customer network strategy. Airline cargo contracts were signed. Never-before-used technology was requisitioned. Hundreds of square feet of concrete was poured over floor space that once housed hundreds of thousands of birds. And so much more.

It's still coming together even now. We are building this airplane while flying it and we know we will reach our destination together very soon—and that is to be the largest exotic mushroom operation in North America before the end of 2022.

How is this Business Enterprise Structured?

Our enterprise is a partnership among deeply devoted players. The Barretts, first and foremost; RAP, the newly established Arkansas Fungi, LLC, our venture capital investors, generous donors. We aim to blaze a trail for other chicken farmers who have similar situations to the Barretts—big debt to the banks, a desire to farm in a way that helps feed the world and provides a real livelihood for their families while caring for animals and the environment. This is Big Scale Change, happening on one farm in Arkansas.

Here's the structure we've built to help make this dream a reality.

Arkansas Fungi, LLC (AF): This is the business entity that will run the mushroom operation. Partners in this entity include Denis Vidmar, the Barretts, and investors. AF is the receiving entity for venture capital funds that are being used to build the mushroom operation. Our work force on the farm will be employees and contractors of AF. Once our operation is up and running, profits will be applied to the expenses incurred securing the Barretts' property. Our hope is that one day in the not too distant future, the land that the Barretts have stewarded for decades will be theirs, free and clear, while they continue to partner in our enterprises.

The Rancher Advocacy Program: RAP is an integral part of the Barretts/AF enterprise strategy. RAP interfaces with this project on a daily basis, providing valuable networking connections to companies, trade associations, farmers, lobbyists, and a multidisciplinary network of experts working to enable farm transitions on a global scale. RAP will be the guiding force that replicates what's happening on the Barretts' farm for so many other farmers to use.

The Barrett Family: Rodney, Jennifer, and Taylor Barrett will continue their critical roles in the startup and expansion of AF. Rodney serves as the chief mechanical problem solver for our construction conundrums, among many other daily roles. The Barrett Family will light the way for so many other farmers transitioning to a better way of life.

The Barrett Cow Herd: The largest team in this enterprise to date, the cows will continue to live in their (sizeable) family unit on the Barrett Farm, for the rest of their lives, munching grass and hay and living free from fear.